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# Relationship Marketing as an Effective Strategy by IGBO Managed SMEs in Nigeria

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## I. Background of the Study

Relationship marketing, according to Gordon (1998) is not a wholly independent philosophy but draws on traditional marketing principles. This view suggests that the basic focus upon customer needs still applies but that it is the way marketing is practised that requires changing fundamentally Christopher et al (1992). If RM is indeed a descendant of traditional marketing then a good starting point in developing a definition of relationship marketing would be to look at how marketing has traditionally been perceived. This traditional view might be summed up succinctly using the Chartered Institute of Marketing's (CIM 1963) definition of marketing as:

*The management process of identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.*

This definition includes a number of assumptions that are important in the discussion of relational strategy development. 'Process' assumes that traditional marketing is a series of activities carried out as part (only) of a company's other functions. It implies a functional marketing department responsible for a fixed number of responsibilities presumably closely associated with the 'marketing mix'. It also implicitly suggests that 'identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements' is the singular responsibility of the marketing department. 'Profitably' is assumed to mean that these responsibilities are carried out in a competitively superior manner Gordon (1998), although there is no indication of the time scale over which this profitability should be measured.

This description of traditional marketing and others of a similar nature emphasise, above all, the functional and process nature of traditional marketing and make no explicit recognition of the long-term value of the customer. The focus of traditional or mass marketing also implies that whatever the status of the customer (non-customers, current customers and past customers) they are all treated in the same way and are of comparable worth status to the organisation.

Berry (1983) was among the first to introduce the term 'relationship marketing' as a modern concept in marketing. He suggested that this 'new approach should be defined as:

*Attracting, maintaining and…enhancing custoer relationships.*

While recognising that customer acquisition was, and would remain, part of a marketer's responsibilities, this viewpoint emphasised that a 'relationship view of marketing' implied that retention and development were of equal (or perhaps even greater) importance to the company in the longer term than customer acquisition. It further implied, by differentiating between customer types, that not all customers or potential customers should be treated in the same way.

Relationship marketing (RM) has been a topic of serious discussion among academics and marketing practitioners for the best part of 20 years. It was, however, during the last decade of the 20th century that relational strategies gained a wider following, and that debate on relationship marketing began to dominate the marketing agenda. During this period relationship marketing was probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management. Relationship marketing in the 1990s became the leading topic of discussions at academic conferences in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere around the globe. Relationship marketing was frequently the subject of dedicated practitioner conferences, academic

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journal articles, (as a general topic, in relationship marketing editions of major publications as well as in at least one dedicated Relationship Marketing Journal,( the International Journal of Consumer Relationship Management), and specialist marketing magazines.

Claims for the benefits of relational strategies were numerous, not least that RM was becoming a unifying force within marketing. Mattson (1997) suggested that here at last, there was a concept within marketing research that served as the generic context for all marketing transactions, whether products or services, consumer or industrial. Gronroos (1996) believed that RM represented the biggest change in 50 years, in effect 'taking marketing back to its roots'. Relationship marketing, it was being suggested, was a (or is the) 'new marketing paradigm' Kotler, (1992, Gummesson, (1999) and a 'paradigm shift' and (Gronroos, (1994); Morgan and Hunt, (1994) and was taking place in marketing practice and thought. Major companies (e.g. British Airways, Boots, Coca Cola Nigeria, First Bank, Union Bank, Virgin Nigeria Airways, Tesco etc) were confident enough about RM's capabilities to appoint RM managers and directors whose principal function was to operationalise the concept. At around the same time Safeway became the first UK supermarket chain to set up a dedicated RM team. Relationship marketing was in vogue among contemporary marketing academics and practitioners, not only in service and inter-organisational contexts, from where it had developed, but even in consumer markets, where it had initially been overtly shunned. O'Malley and Tynan, (1999).

While most marketers approached the concept with some level of rationality, there were some claims that were almost messianic in nature. Reicheld (1990) suggested that the relational concept represented a 'shift in business thinking, as fundamental as the shift to a Copernican sun-centred system was for astronomers'. Elsewhere, he suggested that the benefits of loyalty-based marketing represented 'a kind or miracle of loaves and fishes'. According to Reichheld (1990) relationship marketing was the 'battle cry' of the 1990s. The 'marketing mix' and other aspects of 'traditional marketing' were, it was suggested, dying: 'Long live Relationship Marketing".

Businesses and Companies, especially the Igbo owned SMEs have for long used the Relationship Marketing Strategy to attract and retain customers. It is not an entirely new concept, but a refocusing of the traditional marketing concept, with the emphasise now on customer value.

The attempt to provide answers to the Role of Relationship Marketing Concept and Strategies as a competitive tool by Igbo SMEs has led to this study. The focus of this study therefore shall be to analyse the Role of Relationship Marketing Strategies and Concepts, as a competitive strategy to the growth of Igbo SMEs in Nigeria. The study will also examine the various RM strategies and theories, the procedures to handle customer complaints, and what the SMEs must do to attract, maintain, retain and enhance customers relationships which will in effect lead to profitability.

*a) Statement of Research Problem*

There is that tendency that when new ideas in management emerge, a lot of people tend to embrace them keenly for a while and to see them as the ultimate solution to what ever problems that we perceive to exist (Payne et al, 1998). Equally there is a tendency to put them aside after the initial novelty has worn off, and they are found to be not quite the panacea that are once thought. Marketing has been proved to this "flavour of the mouth" syndrome. The Experience curve, the Boston Matix, all useful tools in themselves are recent examples of ideas that achieved widespread coverage and brief acclaim, only to be quietly dropped by many of their advocates shortly afterwards.

Already there are people who would claim that "relationship marketing" is another of these short-life cycled management phenomena. Indeed there is always a danger that when something is presented as new and different, it will be oversold and thus be rejected when it fails to deliver everything that was promised.

Relationship marketing as it presented is not in itself a new concept; rather it is a refocusing of traditionally marketing with a greater emphasis being placed upon the creation of customer value. Customer value is the summation of all the positive effects that a supplier has upon the customer's business or in the case of end users, their personal satisfaction.

The fundamental principle upon which relationship marketing is founded is that the greater the level of customer satisfaction with the relationship, not just the products or services, then the greater the likelihood that the customer will stay with us.

The importance of retaining customers is that there is strong evidence that customer retention and profitability are directly related. It seems that the longer the customer stays with a seller/producer, the higher the likelihood that they will place a greater amount of business with them, even to the extent of single sourcing. Further, there is likelihood that these retained customers will cost less to service and that they will be less likely to be motivated by price.

Inspite of the apparent usefulness of marketing and relationship marketing in particular, the Igbo SMEs are yet to properly accept, adopt and use it. RM has not been fully integrated into the normal marketing and Business strategy of the Igbo SMEs Companies/Firms. Igbo SMEs are yet to fully understand the usefulness of customer retention as compared to customer acqui-



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sition. RM has not been appropriately used by Igbo SMEs. Igbo SMEs devote much time to customer acquisition, only to loose such customers to competitors and competing products in a short period of time. Customer acquisition by companies and their managers was akin to looking for a needle in the haystack, finding it and then throwing it back, only to look for it once again. It is not worth the time and money to get customers if one cannot keep them.

This study therefore will address the main impact of Relationship Marketing as a strategy and concept to be used by the Igbo SMEs, and discover why most of the Companies are yet to accord it a proper place in the life of a business. It will identify the modern strategies involved, how to treat customer complaints, how to attract, enhance, maintain, adopt and retain customers, for the purpose of customers satisfaction, loyalty and profitability.

*b) Objectives of the Study*

As implied from the statement of research problems, this study has the following objectives. The main objective is to provide the basis for the understanding of the relationship marketing concept and strategies as used by the Igbo managed SMEs in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

i. To examine the extent of acceptance, adoption and usage of the relationship marketing concept, and strategies.
ii. To find out if the size of the Igbo SMEs and a well defined and comprehensive mission statement is related to the degree of the implementation of the relationship marketing concept, and strategies.
iii. To examine if the level of education and experience of the owner manager/CEOs of the Igbo SMEs has any positive influence on the implementation of the relationship marketing concept and strategies by the firms.

*c) Scope of the Study*

The boundaries of the area covered by this study are determined by its time dimension, the type and nature of the industry and the number and spread of the Igbo SMEs. The study is concerned with 50 SMEs, in seven states of Nigeria. Ogun, Lagos, Abia, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers, established between 1st January 1992, and December 2007, a period of 15 (fifteen) years. The period of 15 years is considered long enough to enable us have the within the population of SMEs of our study, those that are old enough and well established, and SMEs of various sizes with diverse relationship marketing practices and performance profiles. Specifically the SMEs will be in the areas of retailing, provision stores, automobile spare parts, electronic sales, pharmaceuticals, and medical sales.

Thus, it is hoped that this will enable us to arrive at some useful academic and empirical evidence and data that will facilitate the establishment of the sort of relationships anticipated in the objectives enumerated above.

*d) Research Questions*

This study aims to provide answers to the following questions;

i. Do Igbo SMEs, accept, use and adopt the relationship marketing concept and strategies?
ii. Is the size of the Igbo SMEs and a well defined comprehensive mission statement directly related to the implementation of the relationship marketing concept and to the level of customer satisfaction?

*e) Research Hypotheses*

This research shall attempt to test and find solutions to the following formulated hypotheses. They are;

Ho : That Igbo SMEs do not accept, use, and adopt the relationship marketing concept and strategies.

Ho : That the size of the Igbo SME and a well defined comprehensive mission statement is not related to the degree of the implementation of the relationship marketing concept by the firm and to the level of customer satisfaction.

## II. Literature Review

What is marketing? Ask 30 experts and you will get 30 different answers. Marketing has a bad press. Phrases like “marketing gimmicks”, “marketing puffery”, “marketing plays” and “marketing tricks” abound (Jobber 2004). The result is that marketing is condemned by association. Yet this is unfortunate and unfair because the essence of marketing is value, not trickery. Successful companies rely on customers returning to repurchase a product. The goal of marketing is long term satisfaction, not short term deception. This view is reinforced by the writings of top management consultant Peter Drucker, who stated,

*“Because the purpose of business is to create and keep customers, it has only two central functions – marketing and innovation. The basic function of marketing is to attract and retain customers at a profit (Drucker 1954).*

The learning from this statement is three fold;

First, it places marketing in a central role for business success, since it is concerned with the creation and retention of customer.

Secondly, it implies that the purpose of marketing is not to chase any customer at any price. He used profit as a criterion. While profit may be used by many commercial organizations, in the non-profit sector, other criteria might be used.

Third, it is a reality of commercial life, that it is more expensive to attract new customers than to retain existing ones. It costs seven times as much to acquire a



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new customer, as it costs to get a current customer to buy from a seller again.

Indeed the costs of attracting a new customer have been found to be up to seven times higher than the costs of retaining old ones, Roserberg and Czepeil (1983). Consequently marketing orientated companies recognize the importance of building relationships with customers, by providing satisfaction and attracting new customers, by creating added value.

Gronroos (2000) has stressed the importance of relationship building in his definition of marketing in which he describes the objective of marketing as to establish, develop and commercialise long term customer relationships so that the objectives of the parties involved are met.

Finally, since most markets are characterized by strong competition the statement suggests the need to monitor and understand competitors, since it is to rivals that the customers will turn, if their needs are not being met.

Marketing exists through exchanges. Exchange is the act of process of receiving something from someone by giving something in return. The something could be a physical good, service, idea or money. Money facilitate exchanges so that people can concentrate on working at things they are good at, earn money (itself an exchange), and spend it on products and services which someone else has supplied (Jobber 2004).

The objectives are for all parties in the exchange to feel satisfied. So each party exchanges something of less value than that which is received.

Today marketing is understood not in the old sense of making a sale "Telling and Selling" but in the new sense of satisfying customer needs. If the marketer does a good job of understanding consumer needs, develops products that provide superior value, prices, distributes, and promotes them effectively, then these products will sell very easily, and customers will be retained.

"Marketing is managing profitable customer relationships". (Kotler 2004). The two-fold goal of marketing is to attract new customers by promising superior value and to keep and grow current customers by delivering satisfaction.

Kotler earlier on defined marketing as a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering and exchanging products of value with others. (Kotler 1997).

In addition, his definition highlights the importance and role of exchange, transaction, and the development and sustenance of relationships over time.

Exchange takes place where there is sufficient match or overlap in the want lists of the marketer and the consumer. The marketer's task is to formulate and implement an offer that motivates the consumer into a transaction activity. Transaction marketing is part of a large idea called Relationship Marketing (RM), which is the practice of building long term satisfying relationships with key parties; customers, suppliers, distributors, in order to retain long term preference and business. Mckenna (1991).

Kotler and Armstrong (2004) defined marketing as a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others.

The American Marketing Association explains that "Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distributing of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives/goals.

Earlier on, the same AMA (1965), defines marketing as "The performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from the producer to the consumer or user. (The American Marketing Association Committee of Definition 1965). What this definition implies is that marketing starts only after the production of the goods and services, hence, it is an outdated one, and replaced by the one mentioned before it.

A definition by Glos and Baker (1972) sees marketing as involving a two fold task;

- Discovering what goods and services consumers need and want, and
- Providing these items for them in the places where the consumers/customers are, at the times that they want them and at prices that they are able and willing to pay".

According to this conception of marketing, it starts before goods and services are produced, and involves the flow of the goods and service to the consumers who demand them. It does not end after the sales have been made. It's object is to provide satisfaction to the customer, and at a profit to the company.

Gronroos (2000) states that "the common theme that surrounds the vast majority of marketing definitions is that marketing is the planning and implementation of almost everything; that an organization does to facilitate an exchange between itself and its customers".

As it facilitates exchange, marketing looks beyond its own organizational boundaries and takes into account external forces that exists in the business environment. Marketing efforts are then adjusted accordingly to facilitate exchange under the new set of conditions.

As conditions continue to change, so does the marketing effort. Consequently marketing is a continuous and dynamic strategic decision making process.



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McDonald (1991) defined marketing as a matching process between a company's capabilities and the wants of customers".

The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) United Kingdom provides a typical definition of marketing,

*"Marketing is the management process which identifies, anticipates and supplies customer requirements efficiently and profitably.*

While customers may drive the activities of a marketing oriented organization, the organization will be able to continue serving its customers only if it meets its own objective. Most private sector organizations operate with some kind of profit related objectives, and if an adequate level of profits cannot be earned from a particular group of customers, a firm will not normally wish to meet the needs of that group (Palmer 2000) Where an organization is able to meet its customers needs effectively and efficiently, its ability to gain an advantage over its competitors will be increased (for example by allowing it to sell a higher volume and/or at a higher price than its competitors. It is consequently also more likely to be able to meet its profit objectives.

Other definitions as itemized by McDonald (1991) in the "exercise marketing orientation section, of the Marketing Audit textbook", includes;

*a) Operational Definition of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises*

There is no universal definition of small scale industry (SSI). The definition varies from country to countries and from institution to institutions within the country based on the policy focus of different institutions, and sometimes based on the level of development and technological advancement of a nation. Definition also change overtime, owing to changes in price levels, advances in technology and other considerations. Criteria that can be used in the definition of SSIs, SMEs, SSEs are (Small Scale Enterprises often include capital investment (fixed assets), annual turnover, gross output and employ-ment). (Alawe 2004). These factors are used because they are functional and easy to measure.

In 1997 the National Council on Industry (NCI). Streamlined the definitions of industrial enterprises for recurrent review every four years (Alawe 2004). In July 2001, the National Council industries at its 13th meeting in Markudi, Benue State (NCI – 13) made the following revisions.

i. *Micro Cottage Industry*

This is an industry with capital employed of not more than N1.5 million working capital. But excluding cost of land and or a labour size of not more than 10 workers.

ii. *Small Scale Industry (SSI)*

This is an industry with total capital employed of over N1.5 million. But not more than N50 million including working capital but excluding cost of land and/or a labour size of 11 – 100 workers.

iii. *Medium Scale Industry (MSI)*

An industry with a total capital employed of over N50 million but not more than N200 million, including working capital but excluding cost of land and/or a labour size of 101 – 300 workers..

iv. *Large Scale Industry (LSI)*

An industry with total capital employed of over N200 million, including working capital but excluding cost of land and or a labour size of over 300 workers. Comparatively must advanced countries seemed to have agreed on a maximum limit of 500 employees as a small form.

*b) The Definition, Domain and Dimension of Relationship Marketing*

The emergency of relationship marketing Gummesson 1999, Payne 1995, Gronroos 2002, Berry 1983) is founded on a criticism of pure transaction focused marketing. Critics claim that traditional marketing concepts and methods developed over decades are based exclusively on transaction (Brodie et al 1997, Juttner and Wehrli 1994). Not only strategic marketing approaches, but also cooperative marketing instruments (e.g. product merchandising, pricing, sales promotion etc) are accordingly aimed at the initiation of transactions with customers often not even clearly defined. However transaction marketing is fraught with problems with respect to the underlying marketing philosophy, the structuring of instruments, and the marketing organization.

*c) Relationship Marketing Definitions*

Most of the concepts, ideas and developments discussed above are present in Gronroos (1994) refined definition of RM in which he described the objectives of RM as to:

*Identify, establish, maintain, and enhance and, when necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, and this is done by mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises.*

No definition will ever be perfect and it may well be that other ideas and concepts may in times also require inclusion. For the purposes of introducing RM, however, this definition will, for the moment, suffice. In later, we will investigate more closely how these concepts were translated into strategies and tactics and their perceived benefits. In particular we will look at the claims that are implicit in this definition. These may be seen to include six dimensions that differ significantly



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from the historical definition of marketing (Gordon 1998). These are that:

- RM seeks to create new value for customers and then share it with these customers.
- RM recognises the key role that customers have both as purchasers and in defining the value they wish to achieve.
- RM businesses are seen to design and align processes, communication, technology and people in support of customer value.
- RM represents continuous cooperative effort between buyers and sellers.
- RM recognises the value of customers' purchasing lifetimes (i.e. lifetime value).
- That RM seeks to build a chain of relationships within the organisation, to create the value customers wants, and between the organisation and its main stakeholders, including suppliers, distribution channels, intermediaries and shareholders.

- Relationship marketing is attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships (Berry 1983)
- The goal of relationship marketing is to establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other parties at a profit so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. (Gronroos 1990).
- Relationship marketing is an integrated effort to identify, maintain and build up a network with individual consumers and to continuously strengthen the network for the mutual benefit of both sides, through interactive, individualized and value added contacts over a long period of time (Shank and Chalasan1992)
- Relationship Marketing is about understanding creating and managing exchange relationships between economic parties, manufacturers, service providers, various channel members and final consumers (Moller 1992).

*d) The Shift to Relationship Marketing*

Difference between transactional focus and relationship focus.

| Transactional Focus | Relationship Focus |
|---|---|
| *Orientation to single sales<br>*Discontinuous customer contact<br>*Focus on product features<br>*Short time scale<br>*Little emphasis on customer service<br>*Limited commitment to meeting customer expectations<br>*Quality is the concern of production staff | *Orientation to customer retention<br>*Continuous customer contact<br>*Focus on customer value<br>*Long time scale<br>*High customer service emphasis<br>*High commitment to meeting customer expectations<br>*Quality is the concern of all staff |

*Source : Payne et al (1998).*

*e) The Ways Igbo SMES Retain Their Customers in Nigeria*

More and bolder initiatives in holding onto customers are occurring among SMEs and companies of various sizes .Although the situation differ from consumer goods versus service and from durables versus non-durables. Customer keeping approaches are tailored to these diverse products. Igbo SMEs/ Companies are benefiting more from their current customers through the customer-portfolio analysis, a customer retaining marketing mix, and a reorganization for customer retention.

i. *Customer Portfolio Analysis*

The first strategic customer keeping consideration involves knowing the purchasing history of a product's or company's customers. For each product there is a customer portfolio, which is a combination of customer types that generates sales and resulting profit. An optimal customer portfolio consists of a balance of new and repeat buyers yielding target sales and profits.

The construction of a customer portfolio begins with determining meaningful customer classification based on market research of actual purchase patterns. Most Igbo managers monitor some customer categories, such as current customers, new customers, brand switchers, trial users, customers who upgrade their purchases and those obtaining products for trade in.

The portfolio segments can be measured in terms of number of customers, number of purchases, demographic and psychographic profiles, and contributions to sales and profits.

Three basic factors are considered in seeking the optimal balance in a customer portfolio. First, products vary according to how readily product differences can be perceived by consumers. When products are selected on the basis of objective superiorities after consumers have tried them, keeping these customers is relatively easy. When product characteristics are experienced largely on a subjective basis ,(as are cosmetics and beer), brand switching usually results more from the consumer's needs for variety, than from product dissatisfaction. Second, product category volume growth affects the balancing of a customer portfolio Having too large a proportion of repeat purchases in the rapid growth stage of a market may indicate insufficient attention to the getting function. Continually generating a large proportion of new buyers in the maturity stage may signify an underdeveloped keeping function. Third, the relative costs and benefits of attracting and retaining customers must be gauged. This requires the calculation of costs involved in winning new customers and holding onto present ones, against benefits in terms of revenues contributed by each of these groups. These figures can be estimated from the data generated in test market experiments.



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The customer portfolio must be based on sound customer feedback research. Most marketing research is project oriented. It addresses known or assumed problems, or it evaluates specific market opportunities. The customer feedback survey is geared to monitor marketing performance by periodically measuring how satisfied (or dissatisfied) customers are. (Czepiel et al 1979). Quantifying customer feedback over time provides a revealing indicator of changes and of marketing effectiveness. It also can flag trouble spots .The amount and content of unsolicited customer complaints reflect a biased sample, but the survey puts them into proper perspective.

ii. *Customer Retaining Marketing Mix*

The marketing mix is a central concept in devising a marketing strategy. Because of the company bias favoring customer getting, specific actions to retain customers receive less planning attention than they deserve. One remedy is to conceive of two separate marketing mixes, one for customer getting and the other for customer keeping. Several major elements should be part of the new marketing mix for customer retention, such as; product extras, reinforcing promotions, sales force connections, specialized distribution and post-purchase communication.

Using Product extras in keeping customers requires giving them more than the basic product that initially attracted them. Product extras for individual customers over time can play sales expansive role. The main approach is to create a total product service system. Whatever the customers purchased initially, the company then present them with related benefits provided by other items in the product line. In this way they come to realize the existence and value of a total consumption system. Many Igbo owned fast food selling companies no longer just sells snacks and burgers ,but complete meals, also for different times of the day (breakfast, lunch, dinner)and different services(eat in, or take out or take away)The customer gets involved in the system rather than focusing solely on the basic product, which might be subject to aggressive competition. Most Igbo SMEs at some predictable date after purchase offers some items as replacement for parts of the products used up or some basic gift items. On reinforcing promotions, the product promotions work better when aimed at existing customers. If a marketer knows who these customers are, benefits can be obtained by giving them reinforcing communications. First, tuning in to customers makes it possible for the company to advance their levels of knowledge and loyalty on products purchased. To some SMEs, advertising and couponing to keep customers, involves a defensive approach to play up product quality and preempt rival new entries. Secondly, this type of promotion can introduce customers to the firm's other products especially through cross sampling. A list of actual customers makes possible direct communication with them. Igbo owned SMEs build such lists through, sales receipts, warranty cards, credit account records, and marketing research surveys. One promotional device for reinforcing customers involves customers' only publications. These are targeted to buyers who have already exhibited some degree of commitment to the product or company, by one or more purchases. The vehicles take the form of periodic newsletters, special reports, exclusive catalogs, and annual reports. A prime moment to add to the customer's momentum is after the purchase act. Any consumer doubts or confusion concerning the purchase can be reduced at that time. Telephone calls are made to determine customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a purchase. Direct mail is also effective. Letters are written to ask about satisfaction with the previous purchase, furnish further product or usage information, present offers for other products or suggests a time to buy the new model. Increasingly, telemarketing is used to follow up purchases .Telephone calls are a more personal and immediate approach than the mail.

In Sales Force Connections, the sales force plays a decisive role in the customer retention function. At a retail or service counter, the sales person is the focal point of the company's strategy and is the firm to the customer (Czepiel 1980). The sales force must be oriented to serving a long term relationship with the customer. Sales person who lacks preparation and knowledge about the SMEs product line and who tries to sell a product rather than solve customer problems, usually do not keep customers for long. The roots of such a situation lie with sales force management and with the sales person. Selection, Training, and Compensation that foster short run goals achievement gear a sales force to today's results at the expense of tomorrows. Igbo SMEs managers who desires to attract a loyal customers, tends to hire better qualified salespeople, train them more, and pay them above average salaries. Others recruit sales personnel at very young ages and mentor then until they have learnt the rudiments of the business, before they are assisted financially to set up their respective SMEs. This has contributed to the sustenance of the entrepreneurial skills of the Igbo speaking business people. The sales force ability to help customers is enhanced by supportive expertise. When customers' problems arise, the salesperson can call upon a team of specialists. Another source of expertise can come from a computerized databank, which provides routine information (costs, inventory stocked, and delivery time.

iii. *Specialized Distribution*

To make products available to the buyers, distribution systems generally focus on where the ultimate transaction takes place. In considering getting



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and retaining as separate function, the possibility exists for arranging distribution along these two lines.

The first method used, involves a separate distribution channels for the getting and keeping functions. One channel is designed to entice, welcome and complete purchases by new customers. The other serves the need of repeat customers .No particular channel lends itself to this distinction; instead it depends on how the distribution strategy is formulated. In many cases, both roles are played by one distribution unit, especially in a retail unit. Yet even in a single location, layout of facilities can separately handle attracting and retaining customers. For example large bank branches can locate various functions in specific physical areas. One designated counter is where accounts are opened and services arranged for the first time. In another corner is found the automated –teller center where convenience minded customers use a computer terminal at any hour of the day for the variety of banking transactions.The same situation also applies to large Igbo retail stores ,where there are separate outlets for both old and new customers.

Vital to a manufacturer's distribution strategy is having a dealer support to foster repeat buying of all its brands. Through an exclusive or selective distribution network, the retailers and Igbo entrepreneurs develop a commitment to the brand when they receive adequate attention from the manufacturer.

iv. *Post Purchase* Communication

A company must anticipate that some customers will encounter either minor or serious problems after purchasing .If the company is not ready to hear and correct these difficulties, the customer may not repurchase or may cancel the arrangement .Whether the company or customer is at fault, standby post purchase activities can be instrumental in saving these customers. The frontline for customer's complaints and inquiries should be assertive customer relations. This can consist of a separate department or the function can be assigned to those personnel already dealing with customers. At best it should be a blend of the two. A company should encourage customers to initiate contact whenever the need arises, to clarify instructions, to request further information, to point out a problem or to seek a remedy. Information hotline, response cards and service desks facilitates these processes.

v. *Reorganization for Customer Retention*

The lack of organizational coordination and control frequently contributes to the loss of customers. This problem takes two basic forms; a lack of sensitivity to customer turnover rates, and insufficient linkage between the marketing function and the operations group (manufacturer and service).

Because customer turnover is an accepted fact of life, it often goes unmeasured. Thus marketers should set acceptable target turnover rates for evaluating market performance. In the absence of clearly defined limits on customer turnover, organizations find it easy to rely on promotions to recruit new batches of customers. In consumer goods companies, the prized assignments are on new products (with their promising growth potential), while established brands (unless very large ones) are favoured less.

Another approach is to assign executive accountability for customer keeping. Establishing a management post for taking care of old business may make as much sense as one for prospecting new business or for developing new products. In some companies, consumer affairs directors have taken on this role.

## III. Research Design and Methodology

### a) *Research Population*

The population of the study is the group about whom the study focuses on. It is the totality of the subjects or elements being studied and to which the conclusions or generalization of our results will apply. (Yomere . and Agbonifo, 1979).

Population is the entire or whole elements of a group that has the probability of being chosen for a given problem of study.

For the purpose of this study, our population shall be the Igbo Entrepreneurs/Owners/ CEOs of the SMEs and their Customers.

This study is on the Relationship Marketing Concept, Strategies and Performances of Igbo speaking SMEs in Nigeria. Our specific study area will be made up of seven states in Nigeria: Lagos, Ogun, Abia, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers. These seven contiguous states have a large SME population. (Federal Ministry of Industries Survey of SMEs 2000). Most business activities in Nigeria are done in those areas. The area has the characteristics of a mini-Nigeria with its multi-ethnic features and the dualism of having both civil service towns and industrial cities. Benin City, Aba Yenogoa, and Abeokuta are essentially civil service towns. Warri is an industrial/commercial city while Ikeja and Port Harcourt combine both features of being administrative centres and industrial cities. Thus, there are good reasons to argue that the findings of this study may be generalized to the urban areas of the country, or at least, to the urban centres of Nigeria.

### b) *Method of Data Analysis*

Data analysis is generally a means of testing hypotheses. The data analysis techniques discussed below will relate to the Six hypotheses. The hypotheses are categorized into three groups;

i. Those dealing with the acceptance adoption and implementation of the relationship marketing strategies (hypotheses one and two).



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ii. Those dealing with the practices and tenets of relationship marketing strategies, customer satisfaction and retention (These are hypotheses three and four).
iii. The one about the relationship between customer satisfaction and corporate performance. (Hypotheses five and six).

All the THREE hypotheses will attempt to establish relationships if any between variables or among various variables. The major statistical data analysis technique to be used will be the regression model.

Regression Analysis is a statistical technique that is used to develop a mathematical equation showing how variables are related. In regression terminology, the variable which is being predicted is called the dependent or response variable. The variable or variables being used to predict the values of the dependent variable are called the independent or predictor variable. Regression Analysis involving one independent variable and one dependent variable for which the relationship between the variables is approximated by a straight-line is called Simple linear regression. Regression Analysis involving two or more independent variables is called Multiple Regression analysis. (Anderson et al 1994)

Regression analysis is used to show causality, in the sense that one of the variables can be used to predict the other variable. It is also used to build models explaining variations in dependent variables. The hope is that extrapolations into new population sets other than those observed can be performed by choosing values of the independent variables for new cases and thereby predicting the most likely value of the dependent variable.

All the regression models will be estimated using the STATIX 92 COMPUTER PACKAGE. In testing the hypotheses, the level of significance will be 5%.

For each of the regression analyses to be used in testing the hypotheses, the following measures will be identified, calculated and discussed.

- R-squared ($R^2$) – the coefficient of determination.
- Adjusted R-squared ($R^2$) – used to take care of the problem associated with $R^2$.
- F-test – to find the significance of a group of regressions.
- DW – a measure of serial correlation.

## IV. Hypotheses Testing and Findings

HYPOTHESIS ONE: Acceptance and Adoption of the Relationship Marketing Concept

Ho : That Igbo SMEs do not accept, use, and adopt the relationship marketing concept.

Ha : That Igbo SMEs accept, use, and adopt the relationship marketing concept.

*Table 1 :* Estimated result of Acceptance usage and Adoption of the relationship marketing concept (AAURMC) by the Igbo SMEs

| Dependent variable → / Independent variable ↓ | | AAURMC | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Co-efficient | T-Value | STD Error |
| Constant | (CON) | -0.90257 | 0.51 | 1.7542 |
| Attention to customer needs, providing gifts and price reductions and error rectification | (ACN1) | 0.45101 | 4.17*** | 0.10805 |
| Customer persuasion through price promotion and product | (CPPP2) | 0.20877 | 2.02** | 0.10345 |
| Giving incentives to customers | (GIC3) | 0.12784 | 1.34 | 0.09535 |
| After sales services | (ASS4) | 0.15440 | 1.58 | 0.09745 |
| Providing direct assurances, quality guarantees and replacing damaged products | (PDA5) | 0.36054 | 1.81* | 0.19866 |
| $R^2 = 0.3236$ $R^2 = 0.2467$ $F(5.5) = 4.21$ $DW = 1.7441$ | | | | |

*Source: Author's Fieldwork 2007/2008.*
***Significant at 1% level
**Significant at 5% level
*Significant at 10% level

This model was estimated using STATIX 92 computer package. Technology and innovation as a competitive strategy was dropped from the model because of its high correlation with other predictor variables.

Table above shows the estimated results of the regression of the relationship marketing concept acceptance usage and adoption. The co-efficient shows that all the five variables are positively related to AAURMC, with only the intercept being negative. This implies that the relationship marketing concept is increasingly accepted, used, and adopted with simultaneous increase in attention to customer needs, distribution efficiency, after sales services, giving



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incentives, providing direct assurances and quality guarantees, intensive promotional activities, product quality with a corresponding directional movement in product prices, and replacing damaged products. The correct positive signs of the co-efficient agrees with our a prior expectations of the relationship between AAURMC and the five variables. Specifically the co-efficient estimate of the variable ACN1 shows that a percentage increase in attention to customer needs by the firms will bring about a relationship marketing concept acceptance, usage and adoption increase of 0.45%. Similarly, a one percent increase in the quality of a product will lead to 0.36% increase in the acceptance and adoption level of the relationship marketing concept by the Igbo SMEs.

To explain the variations in AAURMC and these five variables we performed a t-test on each of the coefficients to test the hypothesis. The table above column 3 shows the t-values of the regression at 5% level of significance.

The t-value for attention to customer needs, error rectification, providing gifts and events, (which is the secret of the success of the relationship marketing concept) is 4.17. It passes the 1% level of significance test. It thus strongly suggests that the Null Hypothesis that Igbo SMEs do not accept and adopt the relationship marketing concept should be rejected and the alternative hypothesis that Igbo SMEs accept, use and adopt the relationship marketing concept should be accepted. Thus with the acceptance of the relationship marketing concept, Igbo SMEs, generally, pay more attention to customer needs, error rectification, giving guarantees, discounts, warrantees, gifts and event provision in order to satisfy their customers, and to retain them for a long period of time.

Similarly, customer persuasion through price, promotion and product (CPPP2) passes the test at 95% level of confidence suggesting that as Igbo SMEs practise the relationship marketing concept, they place more importance on product, price and promotion efficiency. In addition, product quality, direct assurances, quality, guarantee, and replacing damaged products passes the test at 10% level of significance; t-test value in 1.81.

Two variables, after sales services (ASS4) and giving incentives to customer (GIC3) fail the 5% significance test with t-values of 1.58 and 1.34 respectively. This suggests that as relationship marketing concept practices grow, product price and promotional activities are not as relevant for success as the other variables to the Igbo SMEs even though from the co-efficient results they are positive. This could be explained by the fact of the very acute competition in the industry which compels many SMEs to charge virtually the same price for the same type products and brand sold. Customer persuasion through price, promotion and product is more important than after sales activities, since with persuasion about prices, promotion and product, a relationship and direct contact is established with customers, on the need to patronize a particular SME as against another.

The F-test is 4.21. It failed the 95% confidence level test. The F-test is used to find out whether or not a group regressors is significant if all the co-efficients in conjunction are significant. In this case, the F statistic agrees with the Null Hypothesis that as a group, none of these regressors is significant. The study thus reveals that the regressors as a group are not significant and that they do not matter in determining the adoption of the relationship marketing concept. This is expected in this kind of estimates especially when it is realised that emphasis on some of the variables by producers may lead to the adoption of some less rewarding concepts in the market place. For example, emphasis on product quality not based on customer needs and expectations results in Product Orientation. Also, emphasis on intensive promotional activities and product price manipulations not based on customer needs and wants means reliance on the selling concept/sales orientation.

The $R^2 = 0.3236$ or 32%. $R^2$ is the co-efficient of determination. It is a measure of the fit of the model to the data. The study reveals that about 32% of the marketing concept acceptance and adoption is explained by the variations in the independent variables. This is expected because the regression is cross sectional.

Using the $R^2$ (adjusted R-squared), the value is 0.25%. $R^2$ is used to take care of the problem associated with $R^2$. R-squared increases with the number of independent variables. This means that even if we include a variable that is irrelevant to the determination of the acceptance of the relationship marketing concept in the regression, the R-squared will go up simply because there are more independent variables. Thus, in our case, 25% of the variations in AAURMC is attributable to the variations in the independent variables, adjusting for the degree of freedom.

The Durbin Watson statistic is used to test the existence of first order serial correlation. The D.W. value of 1.74 suggests that there is some serial correlation. This could be excepted.

An examination of the variables in conjunction with the evidence adduced above leads to the rejection of the Null hypothesis and an acceptance of the alternative one which is that most Igbo SMEs (over 70%) accept use and adopt the relationship marketing concept.



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*Table 2 :* Estimated results of customer satisfaction and relationship measured by service quality correlated with corporate mission statement

| Dependent variable → / Independent variable Defining Corporate Mission ↓ | AVSMC: Service as a measure of customer satisfaction | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Co-efficient | T-Value | STD Error |
| Constant …….. (CON) | 0.1440 | 0.19 | 0.7767 |
| Marketing segments & targets……(MKTGS) | 0.3227 | 2.61** | 0.1235 |
| Knowing our present & potential customers and competitors ……(KOPPCC) | 0.2800 | 2.27** | 0.1233 |
| Knowing what customers value in us that will make them loyal …… (KOCVML) | 0.2803 | 2.29** | 0.1205 |
| Knowing what customer value in our competitors that will make them stay loyal …… (KOCVAC) | -0.1177 | -0.70 | 0.1677 |
| $R^2$ = 0.3162 $R^2$ = 0.2554 F(5.5) = 5.20 DW = 2.3239 | | | |

*Source : Author's Fieldwork 2007/2008.*

Table above shows that estimated results of the regression analysis of customer satisfaction being a function of a well-defined corporate mission. Specifically, a variable or measure of customer satisfaction, the quality of services rendered by the firms to the customers as perceived by the customers, is used as being dependent on corporate mission statement's clarity as measured by the four predictor variables, namely; MKTGS, KOPPCC, KOCVML, and KOCVAC. The co-efficients show that three variables and the regression line intercept are positively related to customer satisfaction. The only variable that is inversely related to customer satisfaction as measured by the firm's quality services to its customers is KOCVAC, that is knowing what customers value in our competitors, which will make them loyal.

The implications of the above results are that a ten percent improvement in articulating and defining a corporate mission by the Igbo SMEs in terms of market segmentation and targeting, knowing the firm's present and potential customers and competitors, knowing what customers value (customer's needs) in the firm will in turn improve, customer satisfaction derivable from services rendered by the firm by 3.2%, 2.8% and 2.8% respectively.

Conversely, such an improvement in corporate mission statement in terms of the variable – knowing what customers value in our competitors will produce a diminishing or negative impact as far as customer satisfaction is concerned. This is probably due to the great similarity in the type of products normally handled by Igbo SMEs (i.e. motor spare parts, pharmaceuticals, provision and convenience retail stores).

To explain the variations in customer satisfaction and the four predictor variables a t-test on each of the coefficients was performed. This is to test the hypothesis. In Table 22(a) column 3 the t-values of the regression are stated. The t-values for MKTGS, KOPPCC and KOCVML are 2.61, 2.27 and 2.29 respectively. They all pass the test at the 95% level of confidence, that is 5% level of significance. This is a strong suggestion that the Null hypothesis be rejected and the alternative accepted.

The F-value is 5.20. This fails in 95% confidence level test. This shows that the regressors as a group are not significant and that they do not matter in determining customer satisfaction as measured by services.

The $R^2$ = 0.3162 or 32%. This reveals that about 32% of customer satisfaction (quality of services) is explained by the independent variables. The Durbin Waston statistic (DW = 2.3239) is significant at 5% level and shows that there is a no serial correlation.

*Table 3 :* Estimated results: Regression of customer satisfaction measured by the quality of product delivery (QUPDGW) correlated with corporate mission statement

| Dependent variable → / Independent variable Defining Corporate Mission ↓ | QUPDGW: Measure of customer satisfaction | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Co-efficient | T-Value | STD Error |
| CONS | 2.2894 | 3.28 | 0.6983 |
| MKTGS | 0.2538 | 2.28 | 0.1111 |
| KOPPCC | 0.05913 | 0.53 | 0.1109 |
| KOCVML | 0.0254 | 0.24 | 0.1084 |
| KOCVAC | 0.1061 | 0.70 | 0.1508 |
| $R^2$ = 0.1470 $R^2$ = 0.712 F(5.5) = 1.94 DW = 1.5628 | | | |

*Source : Author's Fieldwork 2007/2008*



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The table above shows the results of the regression analysis: Customer satisfaction (QUPDGW) being a function of corporate mission statement. The predictor variables are the same as in The Table the coefficients show that all the variables and the intercept are positively signed. In other words, a 10% positive change in MKTGS, KOPPCC, KOCVML and KOCVAC will lead to 2.5%, 0.60%, 0.25% and 1.06% increase in customer satisfaction level respectively.

Except the t-value for MKTGS, which is 2.28 that is significant at 5% level, the coefficients for the other three independent variables fail the t-test.

*Table 4 :* Estimated Results: Regression of customer satisfaction (RELIADCN) correlated with corporate mission statement

| Dependent variable → / Independent variable Defining Corporate Mission ↓ | RELIADCN: A measure of customer satisfaction | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Co-efficient | T-Value | STD Error |
| CONS | 1.4357 | 1.80 | 0.7993 |
| MKTGS | 0.3822 | 3.01 | 0.1271 |
| KOPPCC | 0.1546 | 1.22 | 0.1269 |
| KOCVML | 0.1761 | 1.42 | 0.1240 |
| KOCVAC | 0.1717 | 0.99 | 0.1726 |
| $R^2 = 0.2010$ $R^2 = 0.1300$ $F(5.5) = 2.83$ $DW = 1.7845$ | | | |

*Source : Author's Fieldwork 2007/2008*

The Table shows the results of the regression analysis: Customer satisfaction defined as how reliable the firm is to its customers being a function of the clarity and comprehensiveness of its corporate mission. All the coefficients of the regressors are positively related to customer satisfaction. Notably, a ten percent change in MKTGS, KOPPCC, KOCVML and KOCVAC will have a 3.8%, 1.5%, 1.8% and 1.7% impact on customer satisfaction (RELIADCN) respectively.

The t-value of 3.01 for MKTGS coefficient shows that it passes the t-test at 5% level of significance. This points to the rejection of the Null Hypothesis and the acceptance of its alternative.

## V. Discussion and Implications of Research Findings

Our task in this section is two fold, viz to summarize and discuss the findings of this study. In doing this, we shall relate our findings and the discussion based on them to our two part model of the adoption and implementation of the relationship marketing concept, with regard to the practices of the tenets of the relationship marketing by Igbo managed and operated SMEs. The relationships between customer orientation, customer satisfaction, customer.

*a) Acceptance, Adoption, Implementation and usage of the Relationship Marketing Concept by IGBO SMES*

The main purpose/objectives of this area/ section is to achieve the first major objective. This involves finding out whether or not, there exists the awareness, understanding, acceptance, adoption and usage of the relationship marketing concept by the Igbo SMEs, and the realization of the whole of the second objective of the study, which is to find out if there are any relationships between some management/workers attributes of the SMEs and the extent of the implementation of the relationship marketing concept.

i. *Acceptance, Adoption and usage of the Relationship Marketing Concept*

From frequency analysis in table 5.8 and 5.9 it is crystal clear that over 75% of the Igbo SMEs accept the relationship marketing concept. It is a confirmation of the findings of Baker and El-Haddad (1982), Ogwo (1986), all in favour of the adoption of the marketing concept, and by extension the relationship marketing concept by Payne (1995) Peck, Adrain, Christopher, Moria, Clark and Morca (1999), Palmer (1995), Gummesson (1993, 1998b, 2000, Gronroos (1994). Our findings are in consistent with the assertion of these authors and may more that majority of the workers and executives have ignorantly or rightly demonstrated a unique understanding knowledge and information of the theoretical and practical under pinning of the relationship marketing concept.

It is very interesting to note that there is no difference in attitudes and opinion, in terms of the acceptance of the relationship marketing concept, between the employed managers, sales representatives and workers of the SMEs and the owner managers. The acceptance of the relationship marketing concept also cut across the seven states of our study. It is therefore safe to conclude that the relationship marketing concept acceptance, adoption and implementation level of over 75% is truly representative of all Igbo managed SMEs in Nigeria and by extension all Nigeria SMEs.

Attention to customer needs and wants is actually the relationship marketing concept in operation. It involves listening to the customer before the



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production, storage sales and marketing of the product and services, which is augmented by the right quality, quantity, price and promotional items to the customers. High product and service quality, based on the needs and wants of the customers is a part of the priority, of given proper and unique attention to the customers numerous needs, in terms of products produced and offered for sale to customers.

The apparent contradiction between our findings in table, where product quality is ranked first by 50% of our respondents, and attention to customer needs ranked first by 40% on the one hand and our conclusion in table is thus resolved. This is so, because product and service quality is one of the easily identifiable customer needs and wants in the SME industry. To many Igbo SMEs, product quality includes the contents of the product, manufacturing and expiring dates, approval by the relevant governmental agencies like NAFDAC, SON, CUSTOMS, and NMA Product packaging, varieties of the products sold, suitability of the products in solving the customers needs and wants are all ingredients of relationship marketing. . The emphasis on product quality as a competitive strategy in Table 5.10 is really a manifestation of the SMEs implied attitude in satisfying the customers, who by implication will remain loyal and attract to the SME other loyal and dependable customers.

From the table here the Null hypothesis Igbo SMEs do not accept,use and adopt the marketing concept is rejected, and the alternatives reflection of the importance that 40% of the SMEs attach to a "attention to customer needs and wants" as a competitive strategy. This shows that as Igbo SMEs perceive competition as acute, the need to adopt the relationship marketing concept becomes paramount in their consideration of the strategies for survival and growth.

The number of the SMEs adopting the relationship marketing concept in our study seems high, when compared with the conclusions of Ogwo (1986) and Agbonifon et al (1988) as it concerns the marketing concept adoption and use in Nigeria. Little or no literature is available in Nigeria on the relationship marketing concept practice. The adoption of the RM concept by the practitioners had been done ignorantly as a normal business practice among the Igbo, people who are predominantly referred to as natural sales people and the "Japan of Africa". The usage of RM has been more of good service or at best evangelistic. The population of our study is made up of SMEs that has survived the first five years of operation. These are companies that must have "learned the ropes" survived the turbulent by highly competitive business environment in Nigeria and must have realise the need for, and the benefits conferred on the SMEs, by the adoption, implementation and usage of the relationship marketing concept. In most industries, the corporate failure rate is highest in the first and second years of the lives of the firms.

After five years of operation, to survive and grow, about 41 (82%) of the SMEs in our study have corporate missions defined and articulated based on the tenets and the principles of the relationship marketing concept.

## VI. Relationship Marketing Concept Pratices and Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty and Retention

The practice of the tenets and philosophy of relationship marketing concept, includes among the following activities. (Gummesson 2002, Bruhn 2003). These most fundamental values of RM are;

i. Marketing management should be broadened into marketing oriented company management. Marketing and sales function are more than just the activities of specialized departments. They are functions that must permeate every comer of an organisation, not least the minds and actions of management (Gummesson 2002). This an old thought according to Gummesson (2002) which has turned out to be enormously difficult to convey and implement. In companies he used the terms full-time marketers (FTMs) and part-time marketers (PTMs) to stress that everybody, irrespective of task and expertise, in fluencies customer relationship either full time or part time. Marketing management in this sense requires marketing orientation of the whole of the company, that is marketing-oriented management.

ii. Long term collaboration and win-win. The core values of RM are found in its emphasis in collaboration and the creation of mutual value. In includes viewing suppliers. Customers and others as partners rather than opposite parties. RM should be more of win-win, than win-lose, more of a plus sum game, than a zero sum game. In a plus-sum game, the parties increase value for each other, in a zero sum game, what one gains is the loss of another. A constructive attitude is expected by all those involved, and all should find the relationship meaningful. If those conditions are fulfilled, the relationships may become sustaining. For a producer and supplier, it is very important to retain existing customers, a fact which is increasingly being stressed. Extending the duration of the relationship becomes a major marketing goal. Too much emphasis has been put on the acquisition of new customers and too little on caring for existing customers (Gummesson 2002). RM and CRM encourages customer RETENTION and discourage



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DEFECTION. They encourage RETENTION MARKETING first, and ATTRACTION MARKETING; getting new customers second.

iii. All parties should be active and take responsibility. RM is not to be mixed up with the traditional selling, which represents the supplier perspective and does not put the customer and interactive relationship in focus. In relationship selling, the initiative comes from the salesperson and depends on – how well the relationship is managed by the seller (Levitt 1983). In this sense, relationship quality and a long term relationship becomes the consumer's trust in the salesperson based on the salesperson's present and past performances (Crosby, Evans and Cowler 1990). But the initiative to action, cannot be left to a supplier or a single party of a network; every one in a network can, and should be active. Contrary to the mythology of marketing, the supplier is not necessarily the active party, in B-to-B customers initiate innovation and force suppliers to change their products and services. Consumers suggest improvements but have a tough time getting lethargic and complacent suppliers to listen chat groups on the internet empower customers to reach out at no cost, but time. It makes customer-to-customer interaction (C-to-C) possible.

iv. Relationship and service value instead of Bureaucratic and Legal values. Bureaucratic and legal values are characterised by rigidity, legal jargon, application of dysfunctional laws and regulations. A focus on internal routines, more interest in rituals than in results, belief in the supplier as an expert, and the customer as ignorant, the customer being a cost and a residual of the system. Customers as masses and statistical averages and the importance of winning over the customer is in dispute. These values historically dominate government and their agencies. Its representatives have previously disclaimed marketing, but the international wave of privatisation, deregulation and demand for competition, as well as the failure of the command economies, has forced a change. RM is a valid concept for public organisations as well, and an understanding of how marketing could be applied to public bodies to the benefit of the consumer/citizen is growing. Unfortunately, bureaucratic-legal values are also common in private companies. Relationship marketing (RM) requires different values based in relationships and services to the customer. These values establish that all customers are individuals and different in certain respects, that the outcome is the only thing that counts, that customers are the source of revenue and should be in focus (Gummesson 2003) and that the suppliers task is to create value for the customer (Gummesson 1993 pp. 40 – 42). Although collaboration is the core property of RM, our RM concept holds that both competition and collaboration are essential in a functioning marketing economy.

v. In RM, loyalty especially customer loyalty is emphasized. In the loyalty ladder, the lowest rung is the contact with a prospect who hopefully turns into a customer, and at first purchase. Recurrent customers are clients, that those who have come back and a long term relationship is in the making. In the next stages, the client becomes a supporter and finally an advocate for the supplier. The fact that this research work is about RM and advocates relationships as essential in marketing does not imply a religious belief relationships as a magic panacea. On the contrary we know that human relationship can be a source of insurmountable hassle as well as of unlimited joy. But we cannot live without them. The larger share of world literature and entertainment deal with relationships between adults, parent and child, police and crook, and between the players in a business ventures.

It is worth noting that a relationship should not be retained if it works badly. Long term relationships and customer care are not the same as admitting customer to the geriatric ward of the supplier, attaching them to the bed, and keeping them on life support. (Gummesson 2002). Relationships should not necessarily be broken just because there is a conflict, however, they can often be resorted and improved or they may be the best option for the parties despite a conflict. The beginning of a relationship is often romantic and passionate. It is when the passion phase fades that the real work of building a relationship starts.

Dwyer, Shurr and Oh (1987) states a common sense RM strategy. "Relationship marketing – can be extremely successful where it is appropriate, but it can also be costly and ineffective if it is not. Conversely, transaction marketing – can be profitable and successful where it is appropriate, but a serious mistake where it is not".

vi. RM involves the provision of high quality services by the SMEs (firms) to the customers and;

vii. The placement of premium value on existing customers and satisfying them on a continuous basis so as retain their loyalty to the SME (firm).

The Igbo SME involved in the above seven core RM values mentioned above is considered to be customer oriented, with the singular important objective of giving maximum satisfaction to its customers and to gain their loyalty over time.

## VII. General Comments

In the SME industry and the Igbo operated SMEs, whether small, medium or large, have accepted

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that one sure way of survival is to accept, use and adopt the relationship marketing concept and the strategies.

The managers of these SMEs especially the literate ones are aware of the principles, practice and philosophy of the relationship marketing concept, and with the increasing competition, the rate of acceptance, usage, adoption and implementation of the RM concept is fast growing. Most Igbo SMEs have in the past used the RM concept and strategies rather ignorantly without even knowing the name for it.

When it is realised that Nigeria is a developing economy and yet has a wholly indigenous industry, the Igbo SMEs accepting and implementing the relationship marketing concept as evidenced by our findings, Olusoga's (1978) assertion of the positive correlation of the adoption of the marketing concept and by extension the relationship marketing concept, with higher economic development is not borne out by our findings. On the contrary, our findings are in agreement with those of Baskdale et al (1982), Iyasere (2002) who found out a surprising similarity of consumer's opinions on most of the topic examined on the awareness and acceptance of the relationship marketing concept in nations at different stages of economic development. The change from a sellers markets, a consequence of the product scarcity of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Nigeria to one of a buyer's market with growing pressures especially in the SME industry (pharmaceutical products, motor parts, convenience and provision stores, clothes, shoes, electrical fittings and appliances etc) has engendered a new development, that is making the adoption, implementation and usage of the relationship marketing concept an inevitable reality. The changing situation makes the conclusions of such writers as Ajayi (1977). Isemin (1977) Alawe (2004), Iyasere (2004) that the Nigerian producer/marketer pays no attention to customer needs, to be outdated in the 1990s and 2000s of Nigeria.

The findings of Kilby (1971) about the forms of competition being based mainly on the quality of product and price reduction are even more outdated. Kilby (1971) saw the Nigerian industry (an SME) as being characterised by the product and sales orientations. It is not clear if Kilby ever believed in the marketing concept and the possibility of its adoption in a developing economy. If he did, he never mentioned it. Our findings show that in the Igbo managed SMEs, because of increasing competition, consumer sophistication, a going crop of professionals and knowledgeable owner-managers, the practices of the Relationship Marketing Concept are being adopted and implemented.

However, the practices of the relationship marketing concept by the Igbo SMEs are still at the elementary stages and not properly done and used. In this regard, there is some considerable truth in Baker and El-Haddad's (1982) conclusion that "one can hardly find a firm which has implemented the concept in each of its details as recommended in the literature", most especially in a developing economy like Nigeria.

## VIII. Implications for Nigerian IGBO SME Operators

As competition becomes more acute in the Igbo SME industry and in the SME sub-sector as a result of both growing internal competition among firms and the imported one (competition) resulting from liberalization and globalisation, the Nigerian business firms and non-business organisations have to embrace the relationship marketing concept; the practice of which ensures survival, profitability and growth. The watchwords of the Nigerian entrepreneur should be a commitment to customers for life. This requires the employment of customer-driven strategy, which entails quality and service excellence at every level. In the process, customers are brought into every department of the company and their voices heard and acted upon. The long-term result of this approach is keeping customers for life, and making them permanently loyal and committed to the firm.

In very simple terms, this means changing attitudes towards customers right from top management to the sales representatives and workers of the company. Top management commitment to the relationship marketing concept at all times is a necessary condition for success. The whole process and activities tagged internal marketing should be meticulously followed by Nigerian corporate bodies. These include top management commitment to relationship marketing concept and its frequent and regular interactions with customers, staff empowerment through training, motivation and adequate authority in order to make them customer-advocates, harmony of department objectives for delivering customer satisfaction, high quality of human resources achievable through the employment and continual training of marketing professionals and the articulation and precise definition of a corporate mission that enthrones the customer and marketing in the organisation.

The Nigerian manufacturer must therefore establish information system facilities and activities such as marketing research to identify, on a continuous basis, customer needs and wants, facilities for handling customer complaints, ways through which all company staff interact with customers and measurement and review mechanism to ensure that results are in tune with set objectives and targets whose major aim is the achievement of customer satisfaction always.

As for external marketing, marketers should pay adequate attention to customer needs in designing, pricing, distributing, physical evidences, process and



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promoting their products, which must be augmented with high quality services. Marketing mix consistency must not only be an achievable objectives, it must also be achieved to avoid any dissonance among marketing elements.

Customer satisfaction is enhanced by easy accessibility of CEO's and top management staff and workers by customers, high quality and reliable product delivery system, good customer relations and high quality and dynamic services to the customer. Nigerian and Igbo entrepreneurs in order to avoid the high failure rate among SMEs must practice those tenets of the relationship marketing concept to ensure customer satisfaction – a sure recipe for success, and for the loyalty of customers.

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